

Mitford family

The **Mitford family** is an aristocratic English family, whose principal line had its seats at Mitford, Northumberland. Several heads of the family served as High Sheriff of Northumberland. A junior line, with seats at Newton Park, Northumberland, and Exbury House, Hampshire, descends via the historian William Mitford (1744–1827) and were twice elevated to the British peerage, in 1802 and 1902, under the title Baron Redesdale.^[1]

The family became particularly known in the 1930s and later for the six Mitford sisters, great-great-great-granddaughters of William Mitford, and the daughters of David Freeman-Mitford, 2nd Baron Redesdale, and his wife Sydney Bowles.^[a] They were celebrated and at times scandalous figures, who were described by *The Times* journalist Ben Macintyre as "Diana the Fascist, Jessica the Communist, Unity the Hitler-lover; Nancy the Novelist; Deborah the Duchess and Pamela the unobtrusive poultry connoisseur".^[2]



The Mitford family

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Background

The family traces its origins in Northumberland back to the time of the Norman conquest. In the Middle Ages they had been Border Reivers based in Redesdale. The main family line had seats at Mitford Castle and Mitford Old Manor House prior to building Mitford Hall in 1828.

Mitford siblings

Nancy Mitford (28 November 1904 – 30 June 1973) married Peter Rodd and had a longstanding relationship with French politician and statesman Gaston Palewski. She lived in France for much of her adult life. She wrote many novels, including the semi-autobiographical *The Pursuit of Love* and *Love in a Cold Climate*. She was also a biographer of historical figures, including the Sun King.

Pamela Mitford (25 November 1907 – 12 April 1994) was known as "Woman".^[3] She married and divorced millionaire bisexual physicist Derek Jackson. John Betjeman, who for a time was in love with her, referred to her as the "Rural Mitford". After her divorce, she spent the remainder of her life as the companion of Giuditta Tommasi (who died in 1993), an Italian horsewoman.^[4]

Thomas (Tom) Mitford (2 January 1909 – 30 March 1945) was educated at Eton, where he had an affair with James Lees-Milne.^[5] He had a lengthy affair with Tilly Losch during her marriage to Edward James; Tom died during World War II while stationed in Burma. According to Jessica's letters, he supported British fascism and was posted to Burma after refusing to fight in Europe.^[6]

Diana Mitford (17 June 1910 – 11 August 2003) married aristocrat and writer Bryan Walter Guinness in 1929. She left him in 1933 for British fascist leader Sir Oswald Mosley, with whom she had two sons, Alexander and Max Mosley. She was interned in Holloway Prison from May 1940 until November 1943. She remained a devotee of fascism and Adolf Hitler.

Unity Valkyrie Mitford (8 August 1914 – 28 May 1948) was known as "Bobo" or "Boud" to her siblings. Her adulation of, and friendship with, Adolf Hitler was widely publicised. She shot herself in the head just hours after Britain declared war on Germany,^[6] but she failed to kill herself and eventually died of pneumococcal meningitis at West Highland Cottage Hospital, Oban, after being transferred from Inch Kenneth.

Jessica Mitford (11 September 1917 – 22 July 1996) was known as "Decca". She eloped with Esmond Romilly to the Spanish Civil War. She spent most of her adult life in the United States. Two years after Esmond was killed during the Second World War, she married Robert Treuhaft, whom she met as a fellow US government employee. She was a member of the American Communist Party until 1958. She wrote several volumes of memoirs and several volumes of polemical investigation, including the best-selling *The American Way of Death* (1963) about the funeral industry. She was the grandmother of James Forman Jr. and Chaka Forman, sons of the African-American civil rights leader James Forman by her daughter Constancia Romilly.

Deborah Mitford (31 March 1920 – 24 September 2014) married Andrew Cavendish who became the Duke of Devonshire, and with him turned his ancestral home, Chatsworth House, into one of Britain's most successful stately homes. She wrote a dozen books.

Mitford sisters

The sisters gained widespread attention for their stylish and controversial lives as young people, and for their public political divisions between communism and fascism. Nancy and Jessica became well-known writers: Nancy wrote *The Pursuit of Love* and *Love in a Cold Climate*, and Jessica *The American Way of Death* (1963). Deborah managed Chatsworth, one of the most successful stately homes in England.

Jessica and Deborah married nephews of prime ministers Winston Churchill and Harold Macmillan, respectively. Deborah and Diana both married wealthy aristocrats. Unity and Diana were well known during the 1930s for being close to Adolf Hitler. Jessica turned her back on her inherited privileges and ran away to become a communist.^[7] Jessica's memoir, *Hons and Rebels*, describes their upbringing, and Nancy obviously drew upon her family members for characters in her novels. In 1981, Deborah became politically active when she and her husband Andrew Cavendish, 11th Duke of Devonshire, joined the new Social Democratic Party.^[6]

The sisters and their brother Thomas were the children of David Bertram Ogilvy Freeman-Mitford, 2nd Baron Redesdale, known to his children as "Farve" and by various other nicknames. Their mother was Sydney Freeman-Mitford, Baroness Redesdale, known as "Muv", the daughter of Thomas Bowles. David and Sydney married in 1904. The family homes changed from Batsford House to Asthall Manor beside the River Windrush in Oxfordshire, and then Swinbrook Cottage nearby, with a house at Rutland Gate in London.^[8] They also lived in a cottage in High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire, which they used as a summer residence.^[9] The siblings grew up in an aristocratic country house with emotionally distant parents and a large household with numerous servants; this family dynamic was not unusual for upper-class families of the time. The parents disregarded formal education of women of the family, and they were expected to marry at a young age to a financially well-off husband. The children had a private language called "Boudledidge" (pronounced "bowdledidge"), and each had a different nickname for the others.

On the outbreak of the Second World War, their political views came into sharper relief. "Farve" remained a conservative who had long favoured the Chamberlain approach of appeasing Germany, but once Britain declared war on Germany, he returned to being an anti-German British patriot and discarded his previous sympathy for the Nazis, while "Muv" continued her fascist sympathies and usually supported her fascist children. The couple separated in 1943 as a result of this conflict. Nancy, a moderate socialist, worked in London during the Blitz and informed on her fascist siblings to the British authorities.^[10] Pamela remained seemingly non-political, although according to her sister Nancy, Pamela and Derek Jackson were virulent anti-Semites verbally during World War II who had called for all Jews in England to be killed, and also wanted an early end to the war with Germany before England lost any more money.^[11]

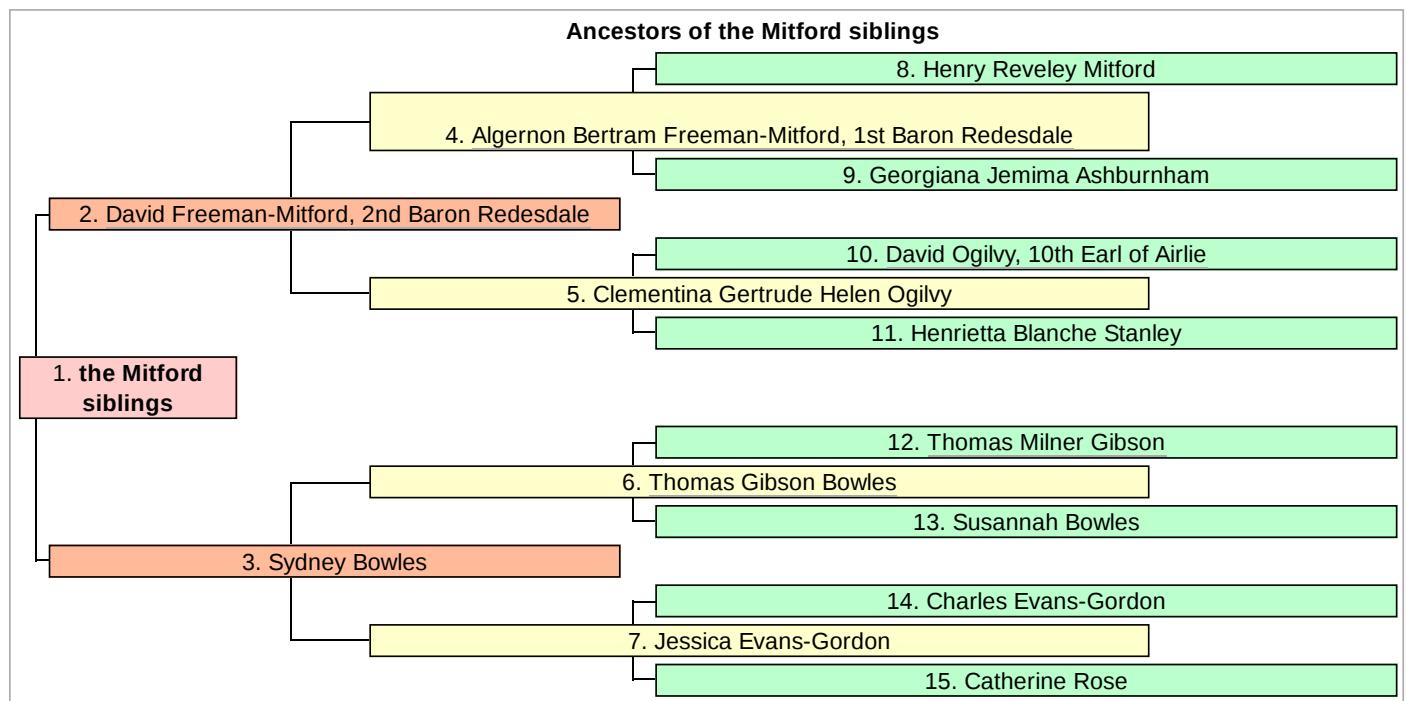
Tom, a fascist, refused to fight Germany but volunteered to fight against Imperial Japan; he was killed in action in Burma in 1945. Diana, also a fascist, married to Sir Oswald Mosley, leader of the British Union of Fascists, was imprisoned in London from May 1940 until November 1943 under Defence Regulation 18B. Unity, fanatically devoted to Hitler and Nazism, was distraught over Britain's war declaration against Germany on 3 September 1939, and tried to commit suicide later that day by shooting herself in the head. She failed in the suicide attempt, but suffered brain damage that eventually led to her early death in 1948. Jessica, a communist, had moved to the US, but her husband Esmond Romilly, a Republican veteran from the Spanish Civil War who volunteered for the Royal Canadian Air Force in World War II, died in 1941 when his bomber developed mechanical problems over the North Sea and went down.^[6] In numerous letters Jessica said that her daughter Constancia received a pension from the Canadian government after Esmond's death until she turned 18.^[6] The strong political rift between Jessica and Diana left them estranged from 1936 until their



Jessica, Nancy, Diana, Unity, and Pamela Mitford in 1935. Of the six sisters, the youngest, Deborah, is absent.

deaths, although they did speak to each other in 1973, as their eldest sister Nancy was on her deathbed. Aside from Jessica and Diana's estrangement, the sisters kept in frequent contact with each other in the decades from World War II. The sisters were prolific letter-writers, and a substantial body of correspondence still exists, principally letters between them.^[2]

Ancestry



In popular culture

- Nancy Mitford's 1949 novel, *Love in a Cold Climate*, which was based on the family, was serialised by Thames Television in 1980 and by the BBC in 2001.
- The daughters were the subject of a 1981 musical, *The Mitford Girls*, by Caryl Brahms and Ned Sherrin, and of a song, "The Mitford Sisters", by Luke Haines.
- A fictional family based on the Mitford sisters features prominently in Jo Walton's 2007 novel *Ha'penny*; Viola Lark, one of the point-of-view characters, is one of the sisters, another is married to Himmler, and a third is a Communist spy.
- The fictional "Combe sisters" in the BBC 2 series *Bellamy's People*, first broadcast in 2010, bear a striking resemblance to the Mitford sisters. Bellamy meets two of the surviving Combe sisters, said to have been notorious in the 1930s and '40s for their extreme political views, now living together in a strained relationship in the dramatically different political realities of 2010. One an avid fascist and the other a committed Communist, the sisters have hit upon the solution of dividing their stately home down the middle, each converting her side into an homage to her ideology.
- Sharon Horgan, Samantha Spiro, and Sophie Ellis-Bextor played a version of the Mitford Sisters in a song-based sketch for Season 2 of the Sky Arts comedy series *Psychobitches*, in the winter of 2014.
- In his French language trilogy of novels - *Le Vent du soir* (1985), *Tous les hommes en sont fous* (1985), and *Le Bonheur à San Miniato* (1987) - Jean d'Ormesson recounts a much-imagined version of the exploits of four of the Mitford sisters, through the characters Pandora, Vanessa, Atalanta, and Jessica.
- A portion of Jessica Mitford's writing is used as a spoken-word introduction to the song "Last Act of Defiance", about the New Mexico State Penitentiary riot, on thrash metal band Exodus's 1989 album *Fabulous Disaster*.
- Jessica Fellowes has written four mystery novels, *The Mitford Murders* (2017), *Bright Young Dead* (2018), *The Mitford Scandal* (2020), and *The Mitford Trial* (2021), which feature the three oldest sisters, Nancy, Pamela, and Diana as major characters, and the rest of the family in supporting roles.^[12]

Gallery

The Mitford sisters by William Acton



Nancy Mitford (1904–1973) Pamela Mitford (1907–1994) Diana Mitford (1910–2003) Unity Mitford (1914–1948) Jessica Mitford (1917–1996)



Deborah Mitford (1920–2014)

References

Informational notes

a. Daughter of Thomas Gibson Bowles.

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2. "Those utterly maddening Mitford girls" (http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/ben_macintyre/article_2641492.ece), Ben Macintyre, *The Times*, London, 12 October 2007. Retrieved 28 July 2009. Archived (https://web.archive.org/web/20080726152821/http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/ben_macintyre/article2641492.ece) 26 July 2008 at the [Wayback Machine](#)
3. Mitford 2010, p. ix.
4. Charlotte Mosley, editor, *The Mitfords: Letters Between Six Sisters*, London: Fourth Estate, 2007, p. 264. According to her sister Jessica, Pamela Mitford had become "a you-know-what-bian" [lesbian].
5. Mitford 2010, p. 40.
6. Mitford, Jessica (2006). Sussman, Peter Y. (ed.). *Decca: The Letters of Jessica Mitford*. Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
7. Boadilla by Esmond Romilly, The Clapton Press Limited, London, 2018 ISBN 978-1999654306
8. 26 Rutland Gate, Knightsbridge, SW7 > Notable Abodes |<http://www.notableabodes.com/abode-search-results/abode-details/139176/26-rutland-gate-knightsbridge-london>
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Further reading

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External links

- Nancy Mitford Website (<https://web.archive.org/web/20020305204517/http://nancymitford.com/>)
- Genealogical pictures of the Mitford family (https://web.archive.org/web/20081021093218/http://www.desmond-mcallister.info/Eng/pub_images/Mitford/Index.htm) at the Wayback Machine (archived 21 October 2008)
- Audio interview with Christopher Hitchens of Jessica Mitford (1988) (<https://archive.is/20130121093209/http://www.dailyhitchens.com/2010/04/jessica-mitford-interviewed-by.html>) at Archive.today (archived 21 January 2013)
- The Mitford Society (<https://www.facebook.com/themitfordsociety>), Facebook

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